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ABSTRACT

Dialogues, or role-playing, are useful in second language instruction because they increase student motivation to learn the language, enhance self-esteem by showing students they can express themselves in realistic communicative activities, and inhibit students less than non-simulated situations. In one teacher's approach, students have no prepared script and do not know when they will be called on to perform. Students are grouped by two or more and placed in a predetermined situation coinciding with subject matter and possible language-use circumstances and involving a conflict of some sort, often cultural. In a business French course, one successful role-play involved simulation of an interaction between a French bank teller and an unpleasant American tourist. A native French-speaker played the teller and dispelled stereotypes of rude French clerks. Other units involved job interviews with underqualified applicants, an error in a product delivery, and interactions at a French store's customer service department. Dialogues can be designed to suit the students' proficiency levels, accommodate individual student personalities, encourage skill practice, and still allow students to lose their self-consciousness. Good results are obtained with minimal correction and evaluation. (MSE)

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THE USE OF SPONTANEOUS DIALOGUES IN THE BUSINESS LANGUAGES COURSE

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THE USE OF SPONTANEOUS DIALOGUES IN THE BUSINESS LANGUAGE COURSE

by Janet C. Stock

Teachers of business languages courses frequently face the problem of bringing realia into the classroom to give the students a sense of actually participating in the French business world they are studying, and also the problem of maintaining the students interest in that world. Often the two problems go hand in hand. The more distant and uninvolved the students feel, the more likely they are to lose interest in the subject matter. Unfortunately most theoretical discussions of business concepts and practices, while fascinating to the teacher, leave the students nodding in their chairs. Even frequent comparisons between the American and French business worlds can fail to inspire all but the most avid fans of Darty and IBM. Special presentations in which the students actively take part in creating at least on paper their own business ventures can help generate student interest but the preparation for these cannot go on all quarter or semester long. Many other activities engage the students to some extent. Writing projects in which the students produce business documents (letters, bills of lading, job applications, insurance claims, income tax declarations, lettres of exchange and so on), games that encourage the students to learn vocabulary,

class discussions centered on current business events, all help capture their attention, but again they cannot be done every day, nor do all topics "turn the students on." What then can the poor bedeviled teacher do to keep the students sitting on the edge of their seats, all eyes and ears riveted on the classroom activity and yet participating personally or vicariously in the business world? What technique can be used every day, can last from five minutes to an hour--whatever amount of time the teacher would like to devote to it? Only one technique can produce this effect and be this flexible, spontaneous dialogues.

Dialogues (or role-playing) have long been proven useful in psychotherapy as well as in second language learning. In the first situation they help the patients understand the reasons for their problems and learn to deal with stressful situations, and in the latter situation, they help the students build their self esteem and confidence in using the target language. Stern (1983) has pointed out that there are three psycholinguistic benefits to the use of drama in language learning. First, it increases the students' motivation to learn the language, then it increases the students' self esteem by showing them that they are capable of expressing themselves in realistic communicative activities, and finally it renders them less sensitive to rejection since it is the character and not the person portraying him who may be criticized and so the

students feel less inhibited and can actually communicate more effectively in the target language.[1] Spontaneous diaglogues are of course drama in a less structured form. Newmark (1982) has pointed out the value of dialogues and dramatic situations in expanding the limits of the classroom and creating the natural contexts for the language being learned.[2] These are the major reasons for using this technique in the business language course.

In these dialogues, the students have no prepared script, do no memorizing, and are usually not warned in advance of when they will perform. They are placed in groups of two (or more) in a predetermined situation and are asked to assume a role and improvise their own dialogue to achieve a certain result. The situations are chosen to coincide with the subject matter under discussion at the time, and to represent a situation the students might possibly be involved in if they were to find work or even just visit the country. They are also chosen to make students aware of the differences in the culture and business practices of the two countries. They usually involve a conflict between the two parties and, as a result, represent a problem to be solved.

I used this technique in the business French course I taught in Spring quarter of 1989. Usually one or two dialogues were performed in front of the class each day at the end of the hour. By the end of the quarter every

student had participated in at least one dialogue. A good example of the typical dialogue used in my class was the one connected with the bank. One student played an American tourist in France for the first time who goes into the bank to cash a barred check he has received. Another student played the bank teller who will not cash the check because a barred check means "for deposit only." To add humor to the situation, I suggested to the student playing the American tourist that he be a particularly obnoxious "ugly" American who is convinced that everything in France should be done the way it is in the United States. The student playing the bank teller was not told how to handle the custome because a native French girl played the role and so I let her behave as she would normally. She showed great restraint and tact in handling the extremely "rude" American. Thus she dispelled the stereotyped image most Americans have of rude French shopkeepers and clerks, and the student portraying the tourist made them realize what a bad impression some Americans make abroad. In this situation, the students received a good example of how not to behave in France as well as an important lesson about French banking.

I have a unit on applying for a job in which the students write job application letters (with a curriculum vitae included) for advertized positions taken from French newspapers. In the dialogue for this unit, I suggested that several students interview for a job with the imaginary

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French firm we have been reading about it in our text. They are looking for a director of the new export-import department. I suggested that the students try to get the job even though they do not have the requisite qualifications or experience and that they try to convince the interviewer that they can do the job anyway with typical American bravado and bluff. The student playing the personnel manager was told of course to "follow the rules" while the students playing the applicants tried to get around them. In these interviews the students learned about the more rigid French system of hiring which emphasizes the professional training of its personnel and the personal experience of the candidates as compared to the more open "let's give them a chance" American system.

Another dialogue concerned the sales and purchasing departments. The buyer for the New York Public Library went to the director of sales at Hachette to explain that he had ordered ten English-French dictionaries from them, and had received the shipment, but, when he opened the carton, he found ten thousand dictionaries instead. He explained that his secretary apparently made the error, appologized, and asked for an adjustment in the price. The student playing the Hachette respresentative agreed to give the curstomer credit for his next order. The students were able to incorporate several newly-acquired business terms into this dialogue.

The dialogue based on the customer service department was perhaps the most revealing and relevant one for the students who will someday go to France. It is very possible that they will purchase something from a store. In this dialogue a number of students played customers who come to the head of the customer service at Galleries Lafayette with objects they have bought that are either defective or unsatisfactory for some other reason. Unfortunately, they had all lost the sales receipt. The directors talks with each one and politely but firmly refuses to give them a refund without proof of purchase. In this dialogue, the students created all sorts of excuses for the missing receipt and offered all kinds of assurances that they were good customers and that they had indeed purchased the object there. One student mentioned that she had several plastic bags with the name of the store on them at home. The customer service representative is instructed not to budge. In this dialogue, the students realized the lack of flexibility in the French customer service and the importance of keeping the receipt as proof of purchase.

Dialogues can be designed to suit the linguistic abilities of the participants. For example, the situation for the dialogue associated with the transportation of goods was assigned to two students with somewhat limited verbal skills. So they were asked to pretend to be foreigners running a business in France--one was a Japanese producer of

pianos and the other an American running a transport service; neither one understood the culture or spoke the language very well. The conflict arose when the Japanese piano manufacturer tried to hire the American transport service to move a seven-foot grand piano across the country, but the American had only a VW Rabbit as her vehicle! The Japanese pointed out that the American firm promised in its advertizing to move "Anything, Anywhere" while the American plead for mercy claiming ignorance of the language as her excuse. The Japanese threatened to sue and used the correct terminology!

These are only examples of the kinds of situations that can be set up for the students. In every case, the students are able to "get into" their roles and concentrate on attaining their goals and thus lose their self consciousness. The dialogues are lively and evoke business vocabulary in a natural way. Because the goals they are pursuing generally can not be obtained, they frequently come to an impasse but will go on trying far beyond the time allotted in the classroom. Natural-born comedians, the students enjoy making the class laugh and the class enjoys watching their classmates perform.

In choosing the students to perform, the teacher needs to be aware of the linguistic abilities and especially the emotional makeup of each student. The more timid (often less-skilled speakers) may be assigned roles in which they

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can perform either in a group or for a short period of time. As a rule, I do not monitor or criticize the students' performances or correct their errors. The dialogues are ungraded. Smith (1984) has noted that when adult speakers monitor their own speech or are monitored by the teacher, they become much more inhibited and lose their spontaneity.[3] In this exercise, emphasis is placed on achieving a specific goal in a specific situation and not on producing perfectly correct language. Occasionally a student may need to be prompted to produce a term to fit the situation. Some correction may be done after the dialogue is completed if the teacher feels it would be useful especially when students use inappropriate language for the situation. A good example of this is the job-interview dialogue in which the student playing the interviewer used the "tu" form for the applicants. I pointed out after the dialogue was completed that the situation required the use of the polite form "vous" as do all formal business situations between people who do not know each other.

On the class evaluation the students filled out at the end of the quarter, they all mentionned the dialogues they had participated in and watched as the most informative as well as entertaining aspect of the course (along with the presentation of their own businesses). Admittedly not all these situations were very realistic, but all provided an occasion for the students to participate personally and

creatively in a simulated business event. The possibilities are limited only by the imagination of the teacher."

NOTES

1. Susan L. Stern, "Why Drama Works: A Psycholinguistic Perspective," in Methods that work: A Smorgasbord of Ideas for Language Teachers, (Rowley, Ma.: Newbury House Publishers, 1983), 208-210.

2. Leonard Newmark, "How Not to Interfere with Language Learning," in Innovative Approaches to Language Teaching (Rowley, Ma.: Newbury House Publishers, 1982), 113.

3. Stephen M. Smith, The Theater Arts and the Teaching of Second Languages (Reading, Ma.: Addison Wesley, 1984), 11-12.

4. Suggested additional dialogues:

Insurance: One student tries to sell comprehensive insurance to the proprietor of a very small bakery. The proprietor thinks he is too small to need the total package. This dialogue makes the students aware of the total responsibility a proprietor must assume for his employees and customers in France.

The PTT: A customer tries to pay his light, gas, and water bills at the city hall but is sent to the post office to open an account and have his payments automatically

withdrawn from his account.

The Sales Department: Students can be travelling salesmen trying to sell a variety of bizarre products which their customers are not likely to want (a 50 pound vacuum cleaner, a space-age can opener, a set of Japanese encyclopedias etc.)

Publicity: Students can be representatives of an ad agency and try to sell a new glitzy advertizing campaign to a funeral home director.

The Stock Market: Students can be stock brokers and try to buy or sell stock for their customers. The stocks can be in "fly-by-night" companies with names like Acme Medical School, Hokey Computers, Inc., Blubber Health Foods. Or their French subsidiaries: Acme Ecole de Médecine, Faux Ordinateurs, S.A., Graisse de Baleine Cuisine-Minceur, etc.